

Media and Girls

"They have ads of how you should dress and what you should look like and this and that, and then they say, 'but respect people for what they choose to be like.' Okay, so which do we do first?"

Kelsey, 16, quoted in Girl Talk



Cosmo Girl Cover

The statistics are startling. According to the 1983 Nielsen Report on Television, the average North American girl will watch 5,000 hours of television, including 80,000 ads, before she starts kindergarten. The 1996 study "Images of Female Children in TV Commercials" found that in the United States, Saturday morning cartoons alone come with 33 commercials per hour. Commercials aimed at kids spend 55 percent of their time showing boys building, fixing toys, or fighting. They show girls, on the other hand, spending 77 percent of their time laughing, talking, or observing others. And while boys in commercials are shown out of the house 85 percent of the time, more than half of the commercials featuring girls place them in the home.

You've Come A Long Way, Baby?

The mass media, especially children's television, provide more positive role models for girls than ever before. Kids shows such as *Timothy Goes to School*, *Canadian Geographic for Kids*, and *The Magic School Bus* feature strong female characters who interact with their male counterparts on an equal footing.

There are strong role models for teens as well. A Children Now study of the media favored by teenage girls ("A Different World: Children's Perceptions of Race and Class in Media," 1996) discovered that a similar proportion of male and female characters on TV and in the movies rely on themselves to achieve their goals and solve their own problems. (The one discrepancy was in the movies, where 49 percent of male characters solve their own problems, compared to only 35 percent of their female counterparts.) Television shows like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and computer games such as *Tomb Raider* and *Perfect Dark*, star girls who are physically assertive and in control. And of course, Lisa has been acknowledged as the brains of the Simpson family since the start.

Despite the progress that has been made there is a long way to go, both in the quantity of media representations of women and in their quality.

In terms of quantity, the media is still a long way from reflecting reality: women represent 49 percent of humanity while female characters make up only 32 percent of the main characters on TV, as shown by a broad survey done in 2008 by Doctor Maya Götz of the *International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television*. This study measured the representation of male and female characters in nearly twenty thousand children's programs in 24 different countries. The media industry justifies this disparity by arguing that it is easier for girls than

boys to identify with characters of the opposite sex. Götz argues that this argument reverses cause and effect, saying that the lack of female characters on TV is what leads to the higher popularity of male characters.

So far as quality is concerned, the media still conform to a stereotyped image of women. Götz's study identifies a number of sexual stereotypes found around the world: in general, girls and women are motivated by love and romance, appear less independent than boys, and are stereotyped according to their hair color – blonds fall into two categories, the “girl next door” or the “blonde b---h,” while redheads are always tomboys – they are nearly always conventionally attractive, thinner than average women in real life, and heavily sexualized.

Magazines are the only medium where girls are over-represented. However, almost 70 percent of the editorial content in teen mags focuses on beauty and fashion, and only 12 percent talks about school or careers. ("Content Analysis of Contemporary Teen Magazines for Adolescent Females," 1991)

Media, Self-Esteem and Girls' Identities

Research indicates that these mixed messages make it difficult for girls to negotiate the transition to adulthood. In its 1998 study *Focus on Youth*, the Canadian Council on Social Development reports that while the number of boys who say they "have confidence in themselves" remains relatively stable through adolescence, the numbers for girls drop steadily from 72 percent in Grade Six students to only 55 percent in Grade Ten.

Carol Gilligan was the first to highlight this unsettling trend in her landmark 1988 study. Gilligan suggests it happens because of the widening gap between girls' self-images and society's messages about what girls should be like.

Children Now points out that girls are surrounded by images of female beauty that are unrealistic and unattainable. And yet two out of three girls who participated in their national media survey said they "wanted to look like a character on TV." One out of three said they had "changed something about their appearance to resemble that character."

In 2002, researchers at Flinders University in South Australia studied 400 teenagers regarding how they relate to advertising. They found that girls who watched TV commercials featuring underweight models lost self-confidence and became more dissatisfied with their own bodies. Girls who spent the most time and effort on their appearance suffered the greatest loss in confidence.